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Shift work, while unavoidable in the Department of Corrections, can be very stressful and can affect many aspects of an employee's life. Studies have found that Corrections Officers who work other than the day shift frequently experience health problems such as ulcers, heartburn, loss of appetite or digestive problems.

This is due largely to not eating balanced

meals, and over-eating junk food or other snacks that are convenient and quick.

Caffeine, the shift workers favorite companion, and continuous mealtime changes contribute to stomach upset and aggravate digestion.

Irregular sleep patterns and sleep disorders may be common among shift workers as well.

Fatigue may cause an employee to be more vulnerable to illness, demonstrate poor job performance, and cause decreased motivation. Seeking a solution and relief, some may turn to sleeping pills or alcohol as a way to relax and get sleep. Many of these substances can be addictive, and can lead to other health problems such as diabetes, epilepsy and heart disease.

These combined factors may lead to depression.

Shift work can also affect an employee's family and social life. Working irregular shifts often times disrupts family routines and activities.

Employees may suffer from high levels of irritability, mood swings and stress, resulting in complications in family relationships. Shift work can place extra demands on employees as domestic partners and parents.

There are some things employees can do to make the situation better. Keep eating patterns as regular as possible to help keep energy levels up, improve sleep and assist the body in adjusting to the shift work schedule. Employees should have a diet that includes foods high in fiber (fruits, vegetables, whole grains), and low fat foods such as fish, chicken, yogurt and various types of beans. The use of caffeine, alcohol and sleeping pills should definitely be limited.

Sleeping maintenance is also very important. Shift workers should try to keep a regular "sleep time" and let family members know how important their sleep schedule is.

Exercise is also very important. Being physically fit assists the body in maintaining good health and makes the entire system better able to cope with the demands of shift work.

Communication and maintaining good relationships with family members and friends are more difficult when an employee has shift work to contend with, but it is possible.

Planning for family time and social events requires more effort, however it is very important as a way of staying connected to others.

Remember that knowledge is power. With a little knowledge about how shift work affects the body, employees have the power to make changes that can improve communication and the overall health and well-being of everyone. *Adapted from The Perils Of Shift Work, Trotman, Graham, December 14, 2004 .*